

REPENTANCE AND HOPE.

BY
RABBI ISRAEL I. MATTUCK, A.M.

A Sermon preached at Bechstein Hall at the Service of the
Liberal Jewish Synagogue, on the Eve of the Day of
—— Atonement, October 6th. 1916. ——

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"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." (Ps. li.)

This is a day of hope. Its great solemnity has perhaps led us to think of it as a day of sadness, for in our minds the sad and the solemn are oft confused. In truth, however, there are happy incidents and aspects of life that are as solemn as the sad ones. The solemnity of this day is due to the great and overpowering hope of which it speaks. It is wrong to speak of this day, as some do, as the "Black Fast." For our ancestors it was a time for wearing white garments, because they were the symbol of joy, of purity and of hope. The hope, it is true, is nurtured in sadness, as a beautiful flower growing out of a dust-heap; but the joy of its prospect overmasters the gloom in which it is born.

The hope comes with the feeling that a new life now begins. The portals of the future are wide open with promises of betterment. The past seems more definitely gone, the future more radiant and free. It is like the dawning of a new day which drives afar off the horrors of the night just gone, and cheers the heart with the promise of brightness and warmth. Standing this day on the threshold of a new life, we are filled with fresh hope. But is there, in reality, such a sharp division between past and future? There are only exceptional and extreme cases where one moment works such a change in a life as to make its future altogether different from its past. A moment of great illumination has occasionally turned a sinner into a saint, though it might be that there were earlier predispositions for such a change. For most of us such changes are impossible. Every atom of our being holds us to the past. Physical and mental habits, which are the products of the past, are in most things our masters. And I think the most of our sins may be attributed to habits of thought and action. Accustomed wrong has the twofold evil effect, that it makes itself appear right, and dulls the power to distinguish between right and wrong. That which we have been in the habit of doing, even though it may be wrong, comes to be right in our eyes. When confronted by new moral issues, we have only, then, a perverted judgment to rely upon. A similar mastery over us is held by common practice. We are often content to accept for conduct the sanction of the generality of men. It is not unusual to defend a line of conduct against some attack from another or some misgivings within ourselves by the argument, uttered or unuttered: most men do so or think so. Because, therefore,

many sins are rooted thus in habit and in an attitude of unreasoning conformity, it is only natural that the fundamental effort in repentance should be to free ourselves from them. Therefore, our first prayer should be, even as the psalmist's prayer in that psalm which is the deepest utterance of penitence and the hope of forgiveness, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

The basis for our hope of moral and spiritual melioration in the future must be a conscious effort for change in ourselves. God guarantees our hopes when they are directed towards a high and spiritually valuable goal. But hope itself must spring from human effort and be accompanied by it. Witness the physical labours of man. His hopes for the harvest of fruits and grains are born out of his efforts in ploughing fields, sowing seeds and watching against weeds and blight. God, working through nature's forces, guarantees the value of these hopes and causes them to be realised; but it is man's efforts that create hope in him and are the condition of its realisation. We have no right to expect that it should be different in the spiritual realm, that man should be relieved from the implications of the association of hope with effort. There is a teaching that man need only hold himself, as it were, aloof from the world, and then only express a desire for pardon, and it will come to him by virtue of God's grace. That is not the belief this Day expresses. It is true that were it not for God's grace all man's efforts would be in vain, and he be forever kept from the salvation for which he prays and longs, and of which he has such great need; yet the gifts of that grace must be earned through positive labour. But our faith in that grace assures us, in repentance, a hope that shall be large out of all proportion to our effort, as the Rabbis say, "God said to Israel, My children, open for me a door of repentance which shall be as large as the eye of a needle, and I will open for you doors through which wagons and chariots may pass."

That hope belongs only to a heart that feels the burden and shame of past sinfulness. There can be no prospect of spiritual and moral advancement for those who have not realised the failures and sins in the past. Repentance, in other words, must precede hopefulness. But where the spirit of penitence has risen, however weakly, there already a light of hope streams richly. "Let man," again our ancient teachers say, "think in his heart to repent, and his repentance has already been accepted." And so the author of the thirty-second psalm associates the blessing of the consciousness of pardon with an earlier confession of sin.

The beginning of Atonement, therefore, lies in human effort. Atonement is the name for the combined acts of repentance and forgiveness. The first is man's part, the second God's. Even the few passages I have quoted from our ancient literature indicate the supreme importance our teachers ascribed to the human element in Atonement. Repentance, say they, brings healing to the world. In this they were as the prophets, in whose message the call to repentance is almost monotonously insistent. "Turn unto me, rebellious children, and I will redeem you." It is a call for that effort away from evil and towards the good which shall make possible God's pardon and establish Atonement. We can understand why repentance is put upon such a high plain, since it might even be said that without man's repentance, God, because of His laws, cannot save him from sinfulness. But the least effort in its direction ascends at once, in the language of the Rabbis, to the throne of God.

The necessity of repentance arises out of human freedom. Because man is free to choose between right and wrong, between the good and the evil, he must, in his own life, feel the consequences of his choice. If that choice be for wrong and for evil, not until he has realised his own mistake and used his freedom to confess that mistake and to turn from it, can he claim the guidance and the strength of divine help. In other words, he must suffer for his wrong choice; for repentance means suffering; it means a wrench from the past; it means an intense pain and shame because of the wrong that has been. And he who has been guilty must himself suffer, not, as is taught by some, another may suffer for him and he vicariously obtain Atonement. The sufferings of another may rouse us to the consciousness of our sin and cause us to realise the wickedness in our conduct; but that realisation of sin can be real only if there is in it pain and shame and a bitter sense of guilt. Every man must suffer for his own sins; and the pain they caused to another can only make that suffering greater; it cannot relieve him of it. The healing of the soul is even as the healing of the body, by bitter draughts, that itself must take, and by sharp cuttings of the surgeon's knife, that itself must endure.

I cannot help feeling that the moral and spiritual appeal of Judaism has in the daughter religion been much weakened by the emphasis on vicarious suffering, by the never-wearying tale of him who, it is said, died for others. And the picture of his suffering which has been given a central place in that religion has often produced a morbid strain in the spiritual life of those who have been influenced by it. The constant passive contemplation of another's suffering makes the mind and heart diseased, and their activities to take on a sickly cast. No wonder that some, who are outside of religion, have come to associate intense religiousness with morbidity! The attitude of Judaism is opposed to any such conception of the place of suffering in repentance. It is not another's but one's own suffering that makes penitence complete unto atonement. When God was asked what is the punishment of the sinner, He answered, "Let him repent that he may be forgiven." In another famous passage we are told how one who had been a sinner sought mercy, and called upon the heavens and the earth, the planets and the stars, and others to plead for him, but they would not. Whereupon he exclaimed, "The matter depends altogether upon myself."

Repentance is an incident in the human life struggle. That man's life is a warfare, as Job said, is even more true in its spiritual than in the physical aspect. Man is constantly fighting against forces within and outside of him that threaten to drag him down, or that would impede his advancement towards a higher degree of perfection. Temptations are all about us and inclinations to yield within us; wrong and injustice, alluring with the promises of great reward, while righteousness and justice show only the hard path whose end is afar off; purity strewn with thorns and briars, while vice beguiles each moment with a treacherous sweetness and lures to the next with the siren's false promises. And every time we yield to a temptation, cords of evil are bound more firmly about us until the habits of evil overmaster us. It is a constant fight, with the enemy attacking every moment; man must needs be eternally on guard, alert and fully armed.

In another sense it is a struggle against the past for the future, against what is bad or at best imperfect yet holds us enslaved through the force of custom, for the sake of something better to be achieved. We adhere to what has been and is, to what habit makes easy, even though there are better things to strive for and more righteous forms of conduct to pursue. It is a struggle against the ease of staying where we are, in order that we may advance. It is a struggle against the manacled hold of achievements, for the sake of progress towards our ideals.

The aim of the struggle is to establish something which has not yet been, to reach a moral and spiritual status which man has not before known. Repentance means only in part a going back to correct the past, it means more a push forward towards the future, not the returning to a state from which man has fallen, but the striving towards the state of moral and spiritual perfection which is his goal.

The future must, therefore, teach the standards for the judgment of the past; and to discover what we should repent of, we must look to the implication of our ideals. The judgment of past actions must be based not only on the knowledge of right and wrong already acquired, but also upon the required and hoped-for next step in the fuller development of this knowledge, which, though vaguely apprehended, yet supplies some effective measure of guidance. Among the sins of which we are told to confess this day are those we have committed inadvertently. I take that to mean more than those due to accident or thoughtlessness, but also those which have been committed through ignorance, not of the present standards of right and wrong, but of the ultimate and perfect conception of the practice of right. "There is no man righteous that sinneth not" means that everyone is guilty of moral or spiritual error, but also—and here the verse is even more instructive—that no man has achieved the perfection of moral and spiritual good or the knowledge of it, and by so much as man falls short of that perfection, by that much is he sinful. There is a gap between what we are and what the ultimate perfection of man will be. Man must judge his actions not by what he is but by what he hopes to be. In the construction of our lives our eyes must always be directed towards the future, as the architect watches the growth of a building to see whether it will serve its ultimate purpose and whether it grows toward beauty.

This aspect of repentance is one of particular moment to those who hold the Liberal view of religion. To Liberalism absolutes are unacceptable; their existence may be accepted, but man's knowledge of them cannot be. We believe in the existence of absolute right and absolute truth, for these are part of God's nature; but it is the meaning of our Liberalism that no man or group of men possesses complete knowledge of that absolute right and truth. Such knowledge among men is progressive; therefore, our standards of right and wrong are changing; an increase of knowledge modifies them. What seemed right to even the best of men a hundred, or even less years ago is now unquestionably wrong. Slavery is the classic example. It is not, therefore, possible to judge conduct by absolute standards, but only by progressive standards; and the judgment by progressive standards is most difficult. It is not enough to ask how far one's conduct and one's life conforms to the accepted conceptions of right and wrong; but in addition, how much one strives by his conduct and in his life to attain to a higher knowledge,

and to express a higher conception, of right. Even at the possible cost of wearying you with repetition, I must say again and again that the demands of righteousness are not satisfied by mere conformity to the generally accepted standards of right and wrong in our time, but in addition by such conformity as is possible with the hope and effort for the establishment of a higher expression of the right. It is not enough to be able to say, "I have done as all men think right," or "I have done as best I know the right"; for that best is necessarily inadequate. It is man's constant duty to strive to know more of spiritual and moral goodness, and to make his life conform to those strivings.

The conduct of life in this wise becomes something of an experiment; and that is unavoidable because of our ignorance of absolutes. We are constantly experimenting in the application of knowledge to conduct; for in practice conduct is judged, not only by the motives which impel it, but by the results it achieves. An act springing from the desire to do right, it is a matter of common experience, might easily result in wrong. My desire to help a poor man, laudable as it is in its origin, might be wrong in practice because of the effect it might have on that poor man, piercing his independence or helping him slide down towards pauperism. But the result of actions cannot always be foreseen. The application in conduct of some newly learned principle is an experiment, like the voyage made by an explorer, upon theories that are logically correct; only the result can be the proof. Conduct as an expression of our sense of right must be judged, not only by its source, but by its effect; and in this way every new lesson in righteousness must be tested and justified. Truth may not be pragmatic, that is, to be defined only as that which produces the best results; but the test of our knowledge of it is in the results obtained by the application of that knowledge to conduct.

It is only life as expressed in conduct that is an experiment; life as expressed in character is not an experiment. The *expression* of truth, the *practice* of righteousness and love, the *ways* of holiness, these are experimental, but righteousness and truth and love and holiness are in themselves absolute realities; and the life which associates itself with them, in its motives, at its centre, in its essence, stands on unshifting ground. That is why character is the means to salvation; it is constructed out of the relations into which we enter individually to the great moral and spiritual facts of life.

We have now again come into view of the idea with which we began, that the only true repentance is an effort for a fundamental change in character, and only when it is that, may hope be associated with it. It means an effort toward a more spiritual view of life, a deeper consciousness of God, a fuller realisation of the reality of truth and justice and love and holiness, and the increase of devotion to them. Repentance, therefore, not only for what we have done, but for the inadequacy of our nature. It is a step forward in the direction of Atonement, by a confession, sharpened by grief, of past sin, by the resolution to live more righteously, and—for this includes them and more—by the effort to enlarge our souls with greater love for the things of the spirit. Through such love and the exercise of it, man works towards unification with God.

We hear much these days about national repentance and hope. It is not easy to find the significance of terms transferred from the spiritual experience of the individual to the life of a nation. We think most often, if not altogether, of the spiritual life and its qualities as the possession of the individual; we rarely, if ever, think of the nation as a spiritual being. Yet had we studied our prophets and paid heed to their instruction, we should have realised that a nation, too, is a spiritual being. It is in its character not out of relation to the character of the great number of its individuals, but it is something more than the addition of them, and its character more than the common denominator of their qualities. Our ordinary language has taken note of this conception of a nation in the expressions, the nation's spirit and the nation's life. This spirit and life are perhaps clearest and best expressed in its political and social organisation. When, therefore, as now, we speak of national repentance, our first thought must be of the national organisation. May there not be need for a great change here, if we are to look forward to its future with the hope for that greater righteousness which shall more highly exalt it?

There is reason for believing that there is such a national repentance. Almost from the very beginning of the war, those who observed the life of the British Army in the field and in the trenches, have reported with almost complete unanimity and insistence that a great spirit of brotherhood has taken hold of the men, binding together all ranks. Class distinctions have vanished and the friction between groups removed, under the strain of a common danger and in the performance of a common task. So far, then, as the men in the firing-line are concerned, the nation's spirit has changed. Will it outlive the war? The answer depends largely on whether those who have stayed at home will strive for the same change. Early training may be responsible, but I cannot help feeling that the first fundamental change necessary for the life of this country, is towards that real democracy which expresses itself not only in votes, but in the strong feeling of common brotherhood and mutual respect. And I am led to believe, by the insistence with which reports from the Front harp upon the fellowship among the men there, that there are many others who feel the need for this change. It would mean imbuing self-respect in many who now possess little of that first human quality; it would mean the unification of groups and classes into one body, eliminating largely that strife and contention which before the war threatened to rend the nation in twain; it would mean raising the nation's spirit with an infusion of richer humanity and so bringing it nearer towards that Atonement, that nearness to God, for which men and nations alike must strive.

I have tried as best I could to show some of the practical implications of the idea of Atonement, some part of the effort required by the desire to attain to it; but the fact of Atonement remains enshrined in that mystical life which is so largely part of our being, that life which does not lend itself to expression in words, which feels and sees, but by powers and faculties greater than those residing in the body of sense. To be at one with God, that is Atonement. We can only speak of the obstacles in the way of that great consummation, and of the means we must strive to use towards attaining it; but of itself, only the heart can know the reality, only living can be the explanation.

